DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 193 571 CG 014 732

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TITLE A Holistic Approach to an Elementary School Counseling Program.
PUB DATE Mar 80
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Personnel and Guidance Association (Atlanta, GA, March 26-29, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Consultants; *Counseling Services; Counseling Techniques; Counselor Client Relationship; *Counselor Role; Elementary Education; *Guidance Programs; Program Descriptions; Psychological Evaluation; *School Counseling; School Counselors
IDENTIFIERS *Holistic Approach; *Massachusetts

ABSTRACT

A holistic counseling program established in the public schools of Ashland, Massachusetts, is presented. The role of the holistic counselor is described as counselor, consultant, educator, psychological evaluator, and liaison to community agencies. The advantages and disadvantages of this approach are reviewed including: (1) increased counselor-child contact; (2) greater counselor credibility; (3) increased workload; (4) possible counselor "burnout"; and (5) more program flexibility. The knowledge and skills necessary for holistic counselors and their relationships with other school personnel, parents, students, and community members are also suggested in this model program. (Author/HLM)

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A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL COUNSELING PROGRAM

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CG 014732

Presented at the Annual A.F.G.A. Convention, March 1980, Atlanta, Georgia

Introduction

Many recent trends in education and guidance which emphasize specialists have resulted in an increasing fragmentation of services. This is especially true with the advent of PL 94-142. School systems have hired psychologists, psychometrists, social workers, guidance counselors, adjustment counselors, and various consultants and in-service training firms to provide counseling services. It often appears that the larger a school system is, the more specialists it requires. The result is a separation of services, with a concomitant confusing of role responsibilities, and a tendency not to "step on someone else's toes." The outcome is typically ineffective communication among the various professionals. This leads directly to diminished services to the children caught in this web and to long delays in the actual delivery of services. What we plan to present is an alternative approach, one in which most of these roles are vested in one key person - the holistic counselor. It is our contention that the resulting "streamlined" process will result in our most basic goal, more effective and immediate services to children.

We have instituted this type of an approach in the public schools of Ashland, Massachusetts. Ashland is a small community with only four schools, two (2) elementary K-4, one (1) middle 5-8, and one (1) high school 9-12. At the elementary level we function as school counselors/psychologists. There is one such full time person at each elementary school. The number of students in each elementary school is approximately 325. We feel that if this holistic type position is to work well, there should be no more than 350 students per counselor/psychologist. Thus, even in much larger systems we feel this approach could be used if the proper ratio is followed.

In effect, this approach does not necessarily reduce the number of personnel required to deliver psychological services, but rather centralizes responsibilities, and hopefully delivers services in a more unified way.

The Roles of the Holistic Counselor

The holistic counselor can be seen as functioning in five (5) specific roles. Our first and primary role is that of Counselor. As Guidance Counselor we are available to all the students in the school through traditional referral sources, i.e. teachers, parents, administrators. We also view our counseling as preventative in nature. For example, we are involved with a number of whole classrooms in affective education programs. As school psychologists we also counsel children with Individualized Educational Plans, identified through the special needs evaluation process.

Our second major role is that of "Consultant." Here we meet regularly with parents in parent groups and individually, also we meet daily with classroom teachers and administrators.

A third role we have defined as "Educator." In this role we offer in-service programs to teachers, film-strips, discussion groups, etc., all designed to further enhance the teacher's skills in dealing with social-emotional concerns of their students.

A fourth role is that of Psychological Evaluator - Team Chairperson during the special needs referral process. Here we function as school psychologists responsible for the psychological component of a special needs evaluation.

Our final role is that of liason to community agencies. Here we coordinate referrals to the local child guidance clinic, confer with community agencies, welfare department personnel, courts, adoption agencies, etc.

During the next section we will enumerate some of the pros and cons inherent in this "holistic model."

Advantages and Disadvantages

An approach of this type has both positive and negative aspects. Some of the advantages are, in fact, two edged swords. The pitfalls, although few in number, are serious in nature.

Perhaps the most beneficial characteristic of the model is the personal contact that occurs between the counselor and the significant adults in the student's life both early and frequently in the referral process of the special needs child, as well as between the counselor and the child him/herself. For example, the person doing the psychological assessment as part of a team evaluation will have already established a rapport with the child through the classroom guidance program and, perhaps, individual and/or small group counseling. The same person will have already established a relationship with the child's parent (s) during the regular school steps of the referral process. Needless to say, being a daily colleague of the student's teacher, a working understanding has already been established with the classroom component of the team.

Once a relationship has been established it generates expectations on the part of parents, teachers, administrators, and children. The "other edge" of personal contact lies within these expectations. Once the counselor has gained credibility the client population grows progressively more active.

Two pitfalls may result from the personal aspect of the holistic approach. If the client population is or becomes too large, a problem of quantity as opposed to quality may develop. This may be compounded by the paperwork involved if the situation reaches the team evaluation stage.

A closely related danger is that of counselor "burn-out." If a counselor becomes overloaded not only can the quality of the service suffer, but the individual may become generally ineffective. Counselors operate within finite limits of both time and energy. An over-extension of the former can lead to a dissipation of the latter. Holistic counselors in general seem to find it difficult to say "no." Being aware of this tendency can help in avoiding trying to do more for more clients, a tendency which will inevitably lead to case over-load and eventual counselor "burn-out."

A second positive aspect of the holistic model is the flexibility it provides in determining priorities and in coordinating psychological services. For example, last fall there was a high incidence of youngsters exhibiting various degrees of school phobia. The counselor's knowledge of the child, the classroom environment, and the home situation afforded him the opportunity to decide which students he would see on a regular basis, which children required a referral to an outside agency, and which youngsters would need only minimal support from outside the classroom.

In the event a child is referred to an outside agency, either in a situation as described above, or as a result of a team evaluation, the counselor would be the main contact person who would provide the necessary information during the intake procedure and would also act as liaison during the course of the recommended therapy. Thus one person would provide personal observations in regards to the student's classroom performance and behavior, his/her performance during the psychological evaluation, anecdotal records from individual and/or small group counseling, and insights into the home situation. The danger in this situation is that the holistic counselor may inadvertantly dominate the situation. In being so central, he or she may skew the view of the child in a particular direction.

For example, specific learning problems may instead be seen as emotional in nature and requiring psychological services.

This centrality can also produce a variety of other problems. Because he or she is central, the holistic counselor collects a great deal of information. Frequently this may result in an information overload situation, where much time and energy is required to sift through and order a great deal of data. This centrality may also result in an excessively high level of expectation by other school personnel. For many, the holistic counselor may be the most visible helping agent, and therefore be expected to accomplish a large range of solutions. This centrality can also have more serious negative effects. The high visibility may make the counselor a point of envy and jealousy, and competition with other school personnel may occur. Further, distribution and delineation of responsibilities may become more difficult because the holistic counselor may be the single person who has contact with all of the diverse features of a case.

Special Considerations in the Holistic Approach

We have already seen that the product of this holistic approach is in many ways a "whole" that is greater than its parts. That is, the combination of a variety of functions in one role brings about an integration, coordination, and harmony that is difficult to see when these functions are spread across a variety of roles. Yet, because of the nature of educational systems to remain with traditional methods of doing things, this role is really a blend rather than a completely new synthesis. Hopefully, in time it will become an entirely new creature, unique, and distinct. However, as a blend certain special considerations become apparent along with its many worthwhile features.

In playing many roles, the holistic counselor has many constituents or clients. Parent, child, teacher, principal - these are all at once potential clients within the same case or activity. This multiplicity of clients leads to a variety of complexities around basic issues in the provision of counseling and psychological services. The first may be phrased in terms of "who is the holistic counselors client?". In many cases the best interests of the child may not be the same as the interests of the teacher, parent, or administration. Does the holistic counselor for example, advocate for a program that is in the best interests of the child when he or she knows that the teacher does not have the training to carry out the program, and the administration does not have the money to fund it? In cases of abuse and neglect, the holistic counselor must choose between what in many cases becomes a matter of opposing sides.

The question, "who is the client?" brings with it an ambiguity concerning confidentiality. The holistic counselor accumulates a great deal of information from a variety of sources. Unlike most school personnel, the holistic counselor may be in close contact with all parties in a particular case. What should be shared with whom becomes a major decision-making process. Guarding against accidental disclosure becomes an even more serious danger. The holistic counselor therefore must assess what is confidential and what is not, what must be disclosed and to whom, and what must be guarded.

Finally, this multiplicity of clients in the same case, makes "bias" an everpresent problem. When each constituent in a school case has its own school staff member, its own advocate, bias is a positive feature. There are many forces on the holistic counselor that can produce bias, and yet which must be resisted. The counselor may be pulled by his or

her long-standing relationship with a teacher, or sympathy for a parent who is going through a difficult divorce, or identification with a beleaguered principal. Thus, one side of the equation in a complex case may be more prominent, and more readily identified with.

If the holistic approach described is to be successful, care should be taken to deal with the problems noted. Maximizing the success of such an approach depends on the person in such a role, and the setting within which she or he works. This is the subject of our next section.

Training, the person, and work situation

The holistic counselor must deal with a variety of problems, perform a variety of tasks, and have a variety of skills. Therefore, the training for such a role must reflect diversity. The person must have psychological and counseling skills, but also a good background in educational philosophy and methods. Without such an education orientation, the holistic counselor will not have the credibility needed to succeed. A variety of theoretical frameworks seems essential. The counselor should have an understanding of dynamic, behavioral, and cognitive developmental approaches. Each of these will be called on in various demands on the holistic counselor. The counselor must have diagnostic and treatment skills. Finally, the counselor should have a good grounding in test administration and interpretation.

Aside from being a Renaissance person, the holistic counselor must be someone who can function independently. A person in this kind of role must be comfortable with responsibility. We have described the role-strain inherent in such a position. The holistic counselor must be able to tolerate this strain, differentiate functions, set limits, and define

task areas. Finally, a good sense of humor will help in gliding over many a problem situation.

We have found that there are a number of elements that should exist along with the holistic role to make it workable. A good principal who understands the role and its functions is necessary to act as a buffer, to differentiate tasks, and to define areas of authority and responsibility. A consultant is essential to provide perspective, and an objective view. The holistic counselor is always in danger of becoming enmeshed in a case. The consultant can help free the counselor from the enmeshment. Finally, back-up services are important. A clinic for long-term treatment, a resource room for remediation, community agencies that can handle more serious family difficulties are all important adjuncts to the holistic approach. These resources allow the counselor to see more children, and to keep each case moving in an appropriate way.

Conclusion

We have presented here what we feel to be a valuable alternative to the more fragmented specialist-oriented approach to children that has developed recently. Although involving its own brand of problems, the holistic counselor approach allows for effective, efficient, and integrated services to children. It is a model that we feel can be used in both large and small systems if the proper ratios are maintained. It is certainly an approach worth examining in those systems that are now suffering from the side-effects of over-specialization.